America's air superiority hangs in the balance

By Rep. John Larson

This May marks the 75th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's historic flight across the Atlantic. Since then, aviation technology in the United States has reached a level of sophistication unmatched in the world.

Ever since 1940, when President Franklin Roosevelt first called for the production of 50,000 military aircraft, our security has been inextricably linked to the overall success of the U.S. aerospace industrial base. In the commercial sector, America's air industry has been globally dominant, contributing an estimated $259 billion to the nation's economy in 1999.

In 2000, the latest year of comparative data, the U.S. aerospace industry posted the highest trade balance of all industry categories. However, despite these positive statistics, it is clear that the United States is involved in a quiet and increasingly desperate struggle to maintain our preeminence in the aerospace field, both commercially and militarily.

In January of 2001, the European Union unveiled its plan — entitled "European Aeronautics: A Vision for 2020" — for gaining dominance of the global aerospace market. This plan lays out an ambitious $93 billion agenda for winning global leadership in aeronautics and aviation over the next 20 years.

Despite our decades of success in the aerospace field, if the United States fails to meet this focused, coordinated effort by our European competitors, we will jeopardize our economic and security advantages in one of the most important capital goods industries.

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Rep. John Larson (D-Conn.)

Due to a combination of a shrinking workforce, loss of market share to European competition, declining government and commercial investment in aerospace research and development, unfair foreign trade practices, and strict U.S. export controls, the U.S. aerospace industry already finds its leadership role shrinking. Aerospace sales as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) fell from 3.5 percent in 1960 to 1.5 percent in 2000. The aerospace industry-produced trade surplus for 2000 fell to $26.7 billion, down from $41 billion in 1998. Industry sales are forecast to decline in 2002 by $10 billion and increased sales to the Defense Department only partially offset greater reductions elsewhere.

Both company and federal funds dedicated to research and development have fallen in constant dollar terms, from a total of $30 billion in 1985 to under $14 billion in 1999 (the latest year for which data were available). While a large portion of this research and development (R&D) decline is in defense-related work, it does show that the U.S. government and industry have reduced investment.

This downward trend has coincided with a similar downward trend in the U.S. share of the world aerospace market, which declined during the same time period from about 70 percent of the global market to less than 50 percent now. A resurgent Europe has become a formidable commercial adversary, at the same time that U.S. industry is losing market share, yet the administration has proposed to cut $58 million in aeronautics research at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and $20 million at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for next year.

In an attempt to reverse these trends, and protect our economic and security interests, I have introduced legislation entitled the Aeronautics Research and Development Revitalization Act of 2002. This bill, which has bipartisan support, focuses on the importance of aviation and aeronautics R&D for the nation, reflecting the aerospace industry's role as a central driver of economic growth in the United States through its consumption and production of high-technology and its creation of high-paying jobs. The bill is also designed to reflect Congress' intent to respond to the challenge laid out in the European Vision 2020 plan, through vigorous and robust increases to NASA's aeronautics R&D funding and the FAA's R&D funding.

Leadership is required to sustain our aerospace industry to make it as vibrant a symbol of America's might in the 21st century as it was in the 20th. This legislation is an opportunity for the country to signal its commitment to a strong and robust aviation sector and its intent to revitalize it in the face of new global challenges.

America has long recognized that its long-term security and sustained economic growth depend on maintaining its edge in scientific achievement and technological innovation. If we lose our edge in the areas where we are most vibrant, our economic prospects will be dimmed and our security will be threatened.

Rep. Larson, a Democrat from Connecticut, is a member of the Science Committee.